improving low-performing schools: policy implications from research

TRANSFORMATION

Inside

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Management Skills for urban classrooms

Urban teachers recognized as effective educators are non-punitive in their approach to handling disruptive behavior. According to a researcher who interviewed 13 teachers designated as "effective" by colleagues in urban schools, they rely on strong relationships built on trust and use management styles responsive to the cultural and ethnic needs of their students. Three characteristics common among these teachers emerged when the interviews were analyzed:

1. *Caring attitude.* The teachers develop personal relationships with students; talk with them about nonacademic matters; create a safe, inclusive environment; and often use democratic processes.

2. *Congruent communications.* Teachers design instruction and interactions to capitalize on cultural communication styles. For example, they use verbal activities with English language learners.

3. *Assertive stance.* Teachers establish business-like environments and avoid power struggles. Expectations are clearly stated, student effort is expected, no excuses are permitted, and inappropriate behaviors are dealt with promptly.

These teachers' students represent diverse cultural and ethnic groups; most qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. What sets these teachers apart is their ability to integrate the characteristics mentioned above.

A number of urban teachers quit within a year for reasons associated with failure to effectively manage a classroom of diverse learners. Helping teachers develop strong, culturally sensitive classroom management skills might be a key to success for teachers and students alike. Suggestions for policymakers:

Support urban teacher education programs. High-quality preservice and in-service programs offer direct experience in urban settings.

Encourage culturally responsive strategies. Addressing the high teacher turnover rate in urban schools means attracting and retaining teachers by educating them to respond successfully to the cultural and ethnic characteristics of their students.

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Source of Research

Dave F. Brown, *How Do Urban Teachers' Professed Classroom Management Strategies Reflect Culturally Responsive Teaching?,* paper presented at the 2002 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.

Systemic Reforms close achievement gaps

School culture emerges as a critical element.

When researchers assessed the impact of the National Science Foundation's (NSF) Urban Systemic Initiatives in four high-poverty school districts, then compared the results to those of nearby nonparticipating middle-class schools, they found the NSF districts had made significantly more progress in closing achievement gaps in math and science over a four-year period—particularly at the elementary level. Within NSF schools, students whose teachers used technology projects, performance projects, and standards-based practices experienced gains in math achievement, and achievement gaps were reduced. Interestingly, while classroom technology had a positive impact on achievement for many Hispanic and White students, it did not leverage similar gains for Black and male students.

The NSF program focused on the largest cities with the greatest number of students living in poverty. It aimed to increase achievement for all students in mathematics, science, and technology by initiating and expanding reform through partnerships with businesses, educational institutions, and community organizations. Between 1993 and 1996, 21 urban sites each received five-year, $15 million awards.

Positive changes in school culture—shared vision and goals among faculty and staff, teamwork, facilitative leadership, and establishment of a learning community that values sharing—were related to achievement gains for both minority and White students. Researchers found that improved student outcomes were likely where teachers viewed themselves as learners and believed their students could achieve.

The researchers evaluated four program sites: Chicago, El Paso, Memphis, and Miami. They analyzed the direct and indirect effects of school variables on student math achievement gains. Gaps were defined in terms of both gender and race/ethnicity (Black, White, and Hispanic). They found that (1) at the middle and high school levels, there was a much less significant effect in closing the achievement gap, and (2) the total effect of instructional influences on student achievement was positive. Messages for policymakers:

Support research on secondary school reform. Several studies, including this one, imply that effecting positive changes in the achievement of middle and high school students might require different tactics from those used in elementary schools.

Encourage positive changes in school culture. School culture yields such an effect on student achievement that researchers proposed adding it to NSF's list of factors routinely analyzed in determining the effects of school reform components.

Contact Dr. Kathryn Borman, associate director, or Dr. Bill Katzenmeyer, director, David C. Anchin Center, University of South Florida, at KBorman813@AOL.com or katzenme@tempest.coedu.usf.edu.

Source of Research

Kathryn Borman, Theodore Boydston, Ellen Kang, William G. Katzenmeyer, Gladis Kersiant, Reginald Lee, Nikhil Mehta, and Karen O. Moriarty, *Assessing the Impact of the National Science Foundation's Urban Systemic Initiative on Student Achievement: Closing the Gap in Four USI Sites,* paper presented at the 2002 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.

Widely Used Reform Model Benefits **disadvantaged urban students**

Independent study among first to examine effects of Success For All in Kentucky.

In Louisville, an urban Kentucky district serving a mostly minority student population, third-grade students in schools using Success For All (SFA)—a reform model that aims to restructure elementary schools to prevent reading problems in the early grades and to address problems swiftly and intensively when they occur—scored significantly higher and made greater gains in reading on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) than third graders in control schools not using the model. Advantages were most striking for those students scoring in the lowest 25% on the pretest. Researchers noted a decline in reading scores during the first year of implementation in two of the SFA schools, but the CTBS scores improved significantly in the second and third years.

These and other findings emerged when independent researchers compared a sample of three SFA schools and three matched control schools on multiple behavioral outcomes (student achievement, suspensions, attendance) and attitudes (school climate measures captured teacher, student, and parent reactions). Their study of SFA schools is among the first in Kentucky. SFA has been used in about 15,000 schools in 48 states since it was established in 1987. Important aspects of the model are research-based instruction, individual tutoring, a full-time facilitator, and family involvement.

Researchers found that attendance rates improved in SFA schools (as did the number of out-of-school student suspensions). SFA teachers gave more positive ratings than did control teachers in the areas of school climate, educational quality, and job satisfaction. Results also showed more favorable patterns for both student and parent reactions in SFA schools. These findings suggest that policymakers should consider the following:

Support targeted, upgraded research on popular reform models. Targeted research could help school decision makers select reform approaches wisely by helping them determine where and how different models work most effectively. Research designs should be upgraded to include randomized field studies where feasible.

Support mechanisms that help low-performing schools find and apply research appropriately. School leaders will find that research conducted in contexts similar to their own is the most helpful and relevant. The study cited here indicates that SFA is worthy of consideration in low-performing urban schools. A study conducted in Texas in 2001 found SFA helpful among African American and Hispanic students in closing the achievement gap. Ready access to such information could help schools base decisions on the best available knowledge from research.

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Source of Research

Marco A. Munoz, Dena Dossett, and Katalina Judy-Gullans, *Targeting At-Risk Students: Evaluating the Impact of Success for All in Urban Settings,* paper presented at the 2002 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.

Funding, School Support, Staff A
key to success of aft

Study cites difficulties attracting and servin

Extended school services can help young people develop positive school attitudes and behaviors, stay out of trouble, and use out-of-school time productively. The success of such programs depends on adequate funding, school support, staff ability, and expanded options for activities and participation. These findings emerged from a multiyear evaluation of the Extended-Service Schools (ESS) Initiative, a program of the Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds, which helped create 60 ESS after-school programs in 20 communities across the nation. The study involved an intensive examination of 10 programs in elementary and middle schools in 6 cities (very few cities operated after-school programs in high schools).

Each community adopted one of four models that had been successfully developed and implemented elsewhere—the Beacon, Bridges to Success, Community Schools, and the West Philadelphia Improvement Corporation. All promote academic and nonacademic development of young people during out-of-school hours. Although their organizational structures and management differ, they all operate in school buildings; involve partnerships between community-based organizations (and/or universities) and schools; offer a range of activities, including academic and enrichment activities, sports, and recreation; and put financial resources under the control of the partnering organization. Key questions focused on student participation, program quality, benefits for students, and operating costs.

Student participation. Demand for the after-school programs was substantial. Of the 10 programs studied, 8 felt they were operating at capacity by the second year. On average, students participated in ESS for 20 days in a semester and attended two days a week, which might suggest little opportunity for impact. However, most participated for two or more semesters, suggesting the possibility of a cumulative effect. Programs that required registration for a greater number of days per week provided more intensive services but delivered these services to fewer participants overall. Students who were most easily recruited for the programs tended to be those who were already "joiners." Higher-needs students and older youth were more difficult to attract and retain. Locating programs in schools serving low-income families is an important factor in providing services to low-income children and youth.

Program quality. The initial planning time was critical, and the ESS programs each received a grant of $25,000 to $50,000, as well as technical assistance, to help support this process. ESS activities were generally well designed and well implemented. As programs matured, they increasingly focused on program quality, although creating and implementing approaches for monitoring and assessing quality was a challenge. The enrichment activities fostered strong adult-youth relationships, provided opportunities for cooperative peer interaction and collaborative learning, and promoted decision-

Afterschool Aha's

The Promising Practices in Afterschool Web site, maintained by the Academy for Educational Development's Center for Youth Development and Policy, initiated with funding from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, provides detailed descriptions of promising practices nationwide at www.afterschool.org.

Ability, and Expanded Options
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making and leadership skills. Interestingly, evaluators found it was not the topic or skill being addressed but the ability of the staff member leading the session that was the key to high-quality activities. Interest was most sustained when leaders could create a positive social environment and a supportive but challenging intellectual environment. It did not seem to matter whether the leader was from a community-based organization or was a teacher. Recruiting and retaining skilled staff, however, were sometimes difficult.

Benefits to students. Program participation was associated with behavior that could help youth stay out of trouble. Participants reported less often that they had started drinking alcohol and said more often that they handled anger in socially appropriate ways. Participation was also associated with positive effects on school attitudes and behaviors, but it is too early to know about effects on achievement. Youth reported doing better in school and attending more often; parent surveys agreed that ESS helped children make new friends, stay out of trouble, and like school more.

Costs. On average, the programs cost $150,000 per school year (excluding use of space) to serve 63 youth a day. The daily cost per youth averaged $15 but ranged from $8 to $36. Schools and school districts were essential sources of support. They contributed, on average, more than 20% of the costs, including some or all transportation, custodial assistance, and snacks. This was in addition to free use of the building. About 60% of the budget needs were funded by cash grants. Promising strategies for sustaining programs include having strong lead agencies for whom the initiative fits a need and developing strong partnerships with providers and funders. Policy implications:

Help communities secure adequate, stable funding for ESS programs. High-quality Extended-Service School programs keep students engaged in learning and improve their behavior in and out of school; they seem a worthwhile investment. Programs benefit when communities provide input, but increasing competition for philanthropic support and the lack of long-term, stable funding from government sources leaves most programs scrambling for survival from one year to the next.

Support efforts to engage underserved children. In the programs studied, older and higher-needs children remained underserved despite targeted efforts to include them. Locating programs in high-poverty schools and expanding enrollment options and the range of activities for older youth helped, but after-school programs could benefit from more information and guidance on attracting and serving these populations.

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Source of Research

Jean Baldwin Grossman, Marilyn L. Price, Veronica Fellerath, Linda Z. Jucovy, Lauren J. Kotloff, Rebecca Raley, & Karen E. Walker, *Multiple Choices After School: Findings from the Extended-Service Schools Initiative*, 2002. The evaluation was conducted by Public/Private Ventures and the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation; the report is available at www.wallacefunds.org and www.ppv.org.

A Special Education Attorney's perspective

Emphasis of IDEA reform shifts from access to quality.

For 28 years, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has provided access to public education for students with disabilities. This year, its reauthorization will likely focus on improving the quality of education and services, with three issues taking center stage—monitoring, funding, and overrepresentation of minorities.

Monitoring. Schools want to reduce the paperwork associated with proving IDEA compliance, freeing teachers to spend more time teaching. Child advocates fear this might weaken accountability and legal guarantees of a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. These concerns reflect the current process-driven nature of IDEA. In 2002, the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education suggested IDEA should become "results-oriented—not driven by process, litigation, regulation, and confrontation." This might spur Congress to simplify the eligibility process, reduce the compliance documentation, and encourage the use of data to monitor student progress and successful strategies.

Funding. Congress intended to provide up to 40% of special education funding but provides about 17%. Wide support exists for increasing federal funding to train and support administrators and teachers in meeting the needs of special education students, who account for 13.22% of public school enrollment. Interest grows in allowing states and districts to use federal IDEA funds for research-based prevention and intervention. Some advocate moving IDEA out of the discretionary budget, but others would link automatic funding to streamlined reporting and results-oriented accountability.

Overrepresentation of minorities. African American children are 1.5 times as likely as White children to be identified as emotionally disturbed and more than twice as likely to be identified as mentally retarded. Seeing that minority students who are poorly prepared for school are not assigned to special education for their lack of preparation should involve better preparing mainstream teachers to manage diverse classrooms, deliver effective instruction, initiate early interventions (especially in reading), rely less on IQ tests (which may have cultural biases), and evaluate student responses to scientifically based instruction.

Other IDEA issues include *No Child Left Behind*'s mandate that special education students meet their state's requirements for adequate yearly progress, the use of vouchers to pay for private schools when parents are dissatisfied with a student's progress, alternative placements for students with disciplinary problems, and a drop-out rate for special needs students that is twice that of their nondisabled peers.

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Recent Reports

The 24-member President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education conducted the most expansive review of special education in the 27-year history of IDEA and submitted its final report to the president in July 2002. Read *A New Era: Revitalizing Special Education for Children and Their Families* at www.ed.gov/inits/commissionsboards/whspecialeducation.

A National Research Council report, *Minority Students in Special and Gifted Education*, recommends early intervention, high-quality general education, changes in referral and assessment processes, and early screening to nurture minority students with special needs or talents. Read the 2002 report at www.nap.edu/books/0309074398/html.

Recommendations in *Racial Inequity in Special Education*, produced by Harvard University's Civil Rights Project and edited by Daniel J. Losen and Gary Orfield, include improving early education. See the executive summary at www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/specialed/IDEA_paper02.php.

The Center on Education Policy reviews the operation of special education in Chicago, Cleveland, and Milwaukee and offers policy recommendations in *A Tale of 3 Cities: Urban Perspectives on Special Education.* The February 2003 report is online at www.ctredpol.org/specialeducation/talethreecities/talethreecities.htm.

Editor's spotlight

Randomized experiments in education face real-world limitations.

No Child Left Behind charges schools with adopting evidence-based practices for raising student achievement. Amassing a valid evidence base, however, requires high-quality research on the effects of various programs and strategies. The National Research Council (NRC) recently proposed a framework for national supervision and support of such studies. Prominent in the NRC discussion, and in communications from federal education agencies, is strong advocacy of the randomized experiment as the favored means of conducting "scientifically based research" to assess the effects of educational programs. In contrast to the "matched-control group" study in which participants self-selecting the experimental program are compared to similar counterparts who did not, the randomized field design assigns participants to experimental and control groups at random.

Many educational researchers, myself included, have mixed reactions to the promotion of the randomized study. On the one hand, I recognize the advantage that random experiments have over matched-control group studies by eliminating *differential sampling*, whereby experimental-group "go-getters" may compete against control group "slackers."

Conversely, I am concerned about the possible limitations of random experiments. When I was a research assistant, my professors drummed into me the need for human subjects to be "blind" to the purposes of the study and of their assigned treatment group. Otherwise, their behavior was likely to change and the results would be biased. Even more worrisome, the "John Henry" effect* could result in an ineffective control treatment reigning superior due to its members being determined to "defeat" the experimental group. In the real world, it's hard to imagine how whole schools or individuals could be randomly assigned to "treatments" without participants knowing what is happening and acting differently as a result.

Another disadvantage of the random experiment is reducing generalizability (or external validity) of the findings by evaluating programs that are *assigned to* rather than *selected by* users. Unless we completely ignore the large body of research evidence attesting to the importance of teacher buy-in for sustaining school reforms, it seems likely that effective schools will operate through faculty participation in choosing evidence-based programs that best fit local preferences and needs. Both the matched-control group and randomized study have complementary strengths and weaknesses. To identify what works, rigorous research support from both approaches is needed. I hope the promotion of random experiments by federal agencies controlling research funding will make such studies more prevalent—but not exclusionary.

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Further Reading

The November 2002 *Educational Researcher,* a theme issue on scientific research in education, features prominent researchers discussing the complex realities of educational research. The October 2002 issue includes Robert Slavin's Wallace DeWitt-Reader's Digest Distinguished Lecture, "Evidence-Based Education Policies: Transforming Educational Practice and Research," in which he examines the promises and pitfalls of randomized and rigorously matched experiments. Both issues are available online from the American Educational Research Association at www.aera.net/pubs/er.

* Folk hero John Henry was a "steel-driving man" who, through tremendous effort, defeated the steam drill that threatened to replace him. He expired at the finish line. Here's a true example of the John Henry effect in action: I recently overheard several principals involved in a randomized study describe how the control-group teachers at their schools were emulating the program-group teachers by trying to adopt the program strategies on their own.

a must read

The National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform (www.goodschools.gwu.edu) has designated as "recommended reading for policymakers" the Annenberg Challenge's final report on its national effort to improve public education. *The Annenberg Challenge: Lessons and Reflections on School Reform* describes results in the areas of the Challenge's three goals: to improve education in troubled inner-city schools, to bring long-overdue assistance to isolated rural schools, and to demonstrate that the arts should be a basic part of every child's education. The report also highlights the Challenge's signature feature, the use of intermediary organizations—community-based organizations such as local education funds—to facilitate large-scale urban reform and examines the obstacles met along the way to improving educational systems in America. The full report is available online at www.annenbergchallenge.org/pubs/Lessons/lessons.html.

about us

TransFormation is written for a policy audience. It contains interpretive summaries of reports and studies about school transformation, with special attention to research on improving low-performing schools. In selecting studies to be featured, the editor reviews two categories of research: (1) research representing a consensus among researchers, based on scientific study and the analysis of quantitative and/or qualitative data, and (2) relatively recent research findings that hold particular promise for improving practice and performance but do not yet represent a consensus of findings across studies.

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